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The Nature of God

IS GOD A PERSON?

NO. 5 OF A SERIES

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by

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THE NATURE OF GOD

A Series of Sermons for Inquiring Minds

February 4th—

THE PLACE OF REASON IN RELIGION

*Why should we analyze or criticize or compare?
Is one religion as good as another?*

* February 11th—

IS THERE A PLACE IN RELIGION FOR THE SUPERNATURAL?

What is the relationship of natural law to religious thought?

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CAN WE PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?

*What are the traditional arguments?
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* February 25th—

THE NATURE OF GOD

An attempt to specifically describe the nature of God.

* March 4th—

IS GOD A PERSON?

*A consideration of the traditional problems concerning the
"personality" of God.*

March 11th—

THE INJUSTICE OF GOD

* March 18th—

DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

March 25th—

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO GOD

* It is suggested that these sermons are most important for the development of the theme.

Is God a Person?

● "The progress of religion is marked by the denunciation of gods. The keynote of idolatry is contentment with the prevalent gods." That is a very striking quotation from an outstanding philosopher in the world today. "The progress of religion is marked by the denunciation of gods. The keynote of idolatry is contentment with the prevalent gods." When a group is afraid to lose its god or gods it is idolatrous. Mankind has only made progress in religion, as in all other branches of learning and human activity, as it has managed to rise upon its past achievements and standards to higher things. Remember that all our ideas of God are our interpretations of a *Reality* that is Supreme and Eternal — but still only our interpretation. And unless we can consistently and persistently put our own interpretations and those of others who have lived before us beneath us, to mount on them, we shall find ourselves worshipping ourselves or our ideas rather than the richness of the Reality that is God.

Now, I want us to be very, very clear on this necessity. We must never presume to think — never presume to think that we have now reached the end. But that is exactly what we do. Christian people have been presuming that the end has already been reached. Already? Nay, reached some thousand years ago, and we have been afraid — afraid to give up our inherited ideas. And all these years have served to encrust our idolatrous attitude. Your idea at any one time is only your idea. Remember that the people who lived even in the time of Jesus were simple people as you and I, knowing a great deal less in fact than you and I, and that their ideas are of no more validity and worth than your ideas, and just as they should have been superseded, so should your and my ideas be superseded. Ideas are only instruments, instruments for greater knowledge of and contact with the Living God — or of any other reality. They are ways of bringing us into contact with something. Their value is instrumental. But when they become out-moded and out-dated and inadequate, they are a hindrance and a handicap, a liability and a great danger. A doctor who refuses to use modern instruments which will achieve the same end results that the old instruments were designed to achieve in their day, is usually a bad doctor, and one that you will not

trust. Then, why should we assume that ideas are on any different level? They, too, are instruments. Their only purpose is to function. They are functional things. They are designed to make God more real to us not merely more emotionally exciting, but to bring us into contact with the reality, with that vital actuality upon which we are dependent. Just as all life, even our bodies, changes from second to second, so our ideas must constantly be changing and growing so that we will not lose contact with the reality upon which we are dependent.

● You shouldn't have the same idea of God this year that you had last year. You shouldn't have the same idea of God next year that you have this year. Now mind, I haven't said you should have a different God. I said you shouldn't have the same idea, for remember that the reality of God is so rich and so deep and so infinite and abounding that the best of our ideas just begin to point it out. Where there is no growth, people die; and when your ideas of God do not grow, you have lost God.

This morning we are going to discuss the "personality" of God. We have sub-titled the sermon, "The Attributes of God." We shall pursue the subject by asking and attempting to answer some ten different questions. Of course, our treatment will be a simple logical extension of the concept developed last week.

First of all, is God the Creator? And we must answer on the basis of our previous study; No, God is not the Creator, at least not in the traditional sense in which the term is used, for it should be clear that this is an unanswerable question insofar as it lies beyond the scope of *knowledge*. Now we may come to find evidence which would point increasingly toward an answer to the question, but since the creation took place before there was any history being written, it would be difficult to arrive at a sure knowledge of the origin of life and the universe, but perhaps through geological discoveries and so on, we may come to see an answer much more definitely than we do at present. But at this stage the creation of the world is one of those unknowable things, and he who builds his religion upon unknowables is surely building upon treacherous, not to mention inadequate ground. We don't know who or what created the world, and it doesn't very much matter. Our lives are set here in the midst of this universe. Now our task is to discover what it is in the universe or our world that is important to the fullest development of human life and values. Surely these most important values cannot be opposed to the Creator of the universe—if such there be. Thus when we make contact with the best we

know, we don't have to worry about doing honor to God. And when we find the best surely we find God. It should be apparent that even if we accept the notion that God is the Being who started the Universe, our most certain, if not the only way of contact is through the universe which He created.

But God is the Creator in a much more real sense than this for He is the Creator of personality. He is the Creator and Sustainer of human life. He is that upon which all good is dependent. He is all Goodness insofar as He is Love and the Growth of Love as we have defined it. Wherever you find personality, you find at its base the growth of mutual connections and creative inter-action; you find Love; and there is no personality where that is not present. God, then, is the Creator of personality. God is the Creator and the Sustainer of good, because all good is only good relative to the standard of Love, creative growth, creative inter-action.

You see there is a great truth involved in the expression: "God in Whom we live and move and have our being." Whether you like God or not, whether you acknowledge Him or not, you live in Him; and you move in Him; and you have your being in Him. He is then the Creator of Mankind, of personality, and of all goodness. That is something that can be established. That is something that has to do with actual existence. That is a realm of tremendous importance. Creatorship in the sense discussed first is entirely irrelevant.

● Is God Eternal? And we must ask, What do you mean by "eternal"? Do you use the term in the sense of eternal as opposed to the finite? Do you mean eternal as being a quality that is not a part of this temporal finite world? Then I must say that God is not Eternal. But when you consider the term to refer to anything which endures from the beginning of time, and as far as we can judge will endure to the end of time, then God is Eternal. Strictly speaking it is impossible to establish anything as eternal, because the next minute may see the end of the things which you have at a previous minute decided are eternal. But if you mean to say that so far as you know you can't conceive of a time when this would not be, this thing that actually exists in the Universe, then you have a meaning for that combination of letters that makes up the word "eternal". It would seem that God, by our definition, would come as close to being eternal as anything could. For we have proven that He is down at the base of life, that God is in inanimate matter as well as animate matter, and that human life can only exist as men adapt them-

selves to this reality, that is to say, learn to live together. Only as men learn how to adjust themselves to this force, not in any superficial cooperative way, but in a deep, underlying creative way, will they be able to go on existing. Any form of life must needs be dependent on this part of reality we have described. Woe be it to us if we think our position of "Lordship" assured and our progress inevitable. It is interesting to reflect on how absurd the idea of the destruction of the Dinosaurs would have seemed to an observer at the time of their greatest glory. Let us remember that God is not dependent upon human beings though human beings are upon God.

● Of course, the highest growth of God at this stage is dependent on man's knowledge of its nature and his devoted intelligent efforts to serve it. But if he turns his back on it God will go on growing even though Man destroys himself because God is an intrinsic part of the basic substance and structure of the universe. Perhaps something else will raise itself up by a growing consciousness of that great good which Mankind is rejecting.

God then is the Creator and He is Eternal and He is Infinite. Now the Term "infinite" must endure the same kind of qualification that "eternal" had to endure because when you say "infinite", you mean something that can never be established. How much is an infinite number? The students of algebra have a form that indicates infinity. It is as far as you can take a number. But you don't actually know how far you can take it, so there is really no way of setting the limit to the end. You only mean that it is as far as anything will go. It's as big as anything can be. It's as important as anything can be. But these are terms that will never be finally established because you never know from second to second what new knowledge and new evidence will come in. However, if you mean by infinite that the power — no, let's not say the power — that the Goodness of God or the Reality we call God is beyond possible exhaustion by Man and Man's mind, then God is Infinite and that's a fairly safe statement to make because the best minds who work in these fields say that no knowledge is absolute. But to say that God's Goodness and His Existence and His Being and His Reality can never be finally plumbed is as sure as sure can be because God is the growth of Love, and no Man can even begin to dream of what perfect Love would be. The possibilities are staggering for you know when you climb to one level that's higher than you have known you see even more on beyond than you saw previously. The more you know of the Goodness of

Love, the more you realize how impossible it is to know it all. The best minds and the best spirits are in perfect agreement on this. What is more, it is perfectly logical. God then is Infinite in this sense.

Is God completely free? Some of you who have been brought up in the orthodox school will recognize some of these terms from your religious indoctrination in catechisms. Is God completely free? If by freedom you mean God can do what He "wants" to do, I would agree. But if by freedom you mean God can do anything, I would disagree. A god who could do anything would not be a good god. A man who could do anything would not be a truly good man, but the argument is not restricted to a purely logical or moral basis. We have defined God as being the growth of Love or the growth of Goodness. Thus, anything that contributes to goodness is part of God, but anything which breaks down goodness cannot be part of God. God is pure goodness and pure goodness cannot do evil. Now it may do what appears to be evil, insofar as men resent the breaking down of the things that they treasure. But, of course, the things that men treasure are not always the good things, and that's why the greatest good sometimes comes with the greatest pain and the most apparent destruction. God is free to do only the good because God is the growth of goodness. He is not free to do anything evil.

And finally in the argument is the fact that God, as we have defined Him, is not the Creator or the Originator of Natural Law, as such. He is a particular part of the universe that comes within the Natural Law. He is the growth of Goodness in the universe. He is that peculiar combination, that peculiar relationship that seems to obtain in all life. He is a part of a great whole, and as such is constantly being broken and destroyed and frustrated. There is no reason, whatever, from the Nature of God to assume that God is the strongest or the biggest in the universe or that He can exercise His "will" at will. He is a part of it all, subject to it all, fighting within it all, struggling for the best of it all.

● Now is God Omniscient? That is to say; "Does God know everything?" And I think we must be led to say: No! insofar as the idea of knowing everything stemmed from the concept of God as a Person. Now you see I have answered the question of the sermon before I reach the specific discussion of it. But if God is considered as the Person who created all and controls all, then it is perfectly obvious that He would have to know everything so that He would be able to guide the destinies of

individuals and of nations by knowing what would happen in the end so that nothing could transpire without His knowledge. If anything were to happen without His knowledge, it would mean that God didn't have complete control so it is a logical necessity with such an approach to say that God knows everything. You must think that He knows everything because if He doesn't you will lose faith in Him. If everything that comes to you is supposed to be within the Divine Providence, then you must feel that it's for your good always. If it happens without God knowing, it means that somebody else may someday prove to be stronger than God, or is even now stronger. Hence the necessity of the idea of Satan to account for some of the things that God perhaps "knew" about but couldn't help because there had sprung up a being that succeeded in wresting some of God's power from Him.

● On the basis of our study and approach we must say that God is not omniscient and cannot "know" in any normal sense of the term for "He" is not a person. God is something within the world and that Something is sometimes beaten down, and that Something as far as we can determine on the basis of evidence does not have a body and therefore does not have a mind and therefore cannot know everything or anything in the sense that Men use the term "know".

Now is God Omnipresent? Is God present everywhere? Yes. God is present everywhere. You can't have any section of life, any particle of being without God there. You can't have a war without God being there. You can't have destruction without God being there. Now He may be very little in evidence, but He is there. The very bitterness, destruction, and brutality that we hate is hateful in our eyes and minds and spirits only because we know that it is against the best. It is against Love. Things are measured in their horror by what they do to Love and the relationships of men with each other. The more frustration and destruction of the growth of connections — the growth of God — the more horror. Wherever men and women love, there is God. Wherever men live together, there is God. Wherever you find a creative growth or a synthesis, there is God. God is in everything.

Is God then Omnipotent? Does God have all power. We have already answered this question in the negative. As far as we are able to determine, we know from the very nature of His being that God cannot have all power. There is nothing in our description and definition to imply that He would have

all power. Furthermore, there is nothing in our experience of God to demand that He should have all power or to indicate that He does, because we constantly see the good being destroyed. This war is the greatest example of the destruction of these values that the world has ever seen. And no man can predict that this is a turning point or the end of it. No man knows that out of this will come greater and greater good. As it begins to appear now, we may go further and further down. What then is the meaning of saying that God is all-powerful, if you can see with your own eyes that the good is frequently destroyed by brute strength, by ignorance, and waywardness, and indifference and hostility. To say that it's all within the plan of God is the weakest possible way out of a nasty problem. There is no evidence for it at all. It is a conclusion spiritually necessary because of our previous assertions, but with no spiritual, moral or logical strength. It is an excuse for inaction and lack of concern with practical problems. It is the weak justification of a weary fatalism. The sooner we realize that all is not equally good or bad and that it isn't necessarily going to work out for the good, the more effective we will be as religious people in a very ugly world.

Is God an Individual? We answer Yes! — God is an Individual. What do you mean by "individual"? You mean that this thing, or this person has a certain form that persists so that in spite of the fact that each person differs in his complete being from one second to another, nevertheless, you can recognize an individual from one year to another, or from one decade to another. There is something there that endures. It is the form of that individual, be it facial form, be it characteristics of attitude or be it the way of doing things. Individuality, in objects, animals or persons is the existence of a particular form that endures through any and all vicissitudes or changes of time and place.

● Now isn't it clear that God, since He is the growth of goodness is an Individual in the sense that He is always the same wherever you find Him? Oh, He is in different states. He is there on the battlefield, and He is there in the home. He is there where men are gathered together on a hunting trip. He is here in this Church in the common interests that bind us together. He is in this village. He is in our nation. He is even in our quarreling and everywhere in different forms with various types of appeal and various demands, but He is always the same thing because He is always the growth of goodness. And wherever you have creative inter-action of various elements, toward

this new synthesis involving all the good of these individuals, and then something more, you have God. Thus God is to be distinguished from everything else in the universe. He is something peculiar, something very individual.

Now, is God a Person? It is plain from what we have said that He is not a Person. What do you mean by a "person"? You mean someone who has ears, who has eyes, who has language, a brain, a mouth and viscera, two arms and two legs! What other kind of a person do you know? What proof do you have for the existence of anything else that could be called a person that would not conform to this description, this definition? You mean by a person these things that I have been describing so briefly. Have you ever met a person who didn't conform to this type of definition? Oh, a particular individual may not have eyes, may not have ears, may not have two arms and may not have two legs, but has some of these things, has some of this particular form. Where some of these are lacking it is due to a tragic accident, or one of those quirks of birth. But nevertheless by the use of the term "person" or personality, you refer to such as we. Now, what right have we to talk of God in such terms? What right have we to create God in our image? From the standpoint of mere desire would you want God to be such as we are? Would you want God to be such as you?

How did this idea of God as a person arise? It is normal. It is normal insofar as when we are in trouble we want to feel that there is someone there to help us. And most of your help comes from people. When we are in a tight spot, there is a person there to help us, if we have friends and loved ones. So when man faced this world, this mysterious, awful world, he wanted to feel that there was some person there to help him. He naturally thought in terms of a person. Trees had personalities, stones had personalities, and people resided in them, and in the thunder and lightning. Gods lived on the mountains. But for modern man to bring down that primitive idea to his own day of enlightenment is to make a dreadful mistake by freezing on to an out-dated, out-moded and antiquated concept which doesn't help but only hinders. Furthermore you should realize that the idea of God as a Person is restricted in the modern world to a very few religions and to the minority group. God, in the religion of the East and the Orient is not a Person. It is in a large part, a Christian development, and don't assume that because it is Christian it is therefore right.

What is the need and value men have sought by ascribing personality to God? We talk of God as "He", and I speak of "Him" here and I pray to Him as "Thou" and "Thee". Why do we still do that? Because there is no other way I know of describing Him. Would you use "it"? "It" is reserved in our language for inferior things, for that which is below the human. "He" is the only term in our language to describe Him. Someday, perhaps, we will find another term, but in the meantime, we will use the best that we have got. It is also important that we should come to feel an intimate personal relationship with this thing upon which we are dependent. And when we do it is entirely proper and natural to use intimate terms. This is a most common practice and a very helpful one. But when we begin to believe that the intimate terms are technically descriptive we destroy the validity of our analogy and thus instead of helping, it becomes a tool that hinders because it conveys the wrong impression of that with which we are trying to achieve a real relationship.

Do you want to go on feeling that God is your Father? You can. I am not trying to destroy any of these terms. I only want us to understand them for what they really mean. I only want them to be helps to us and not hindrances. What do we mean by the "Fatherhood of God"? We don't mean that God procreates. We mean that God is the source of our goodness and our well-being. We mean that God is the Creator of Personality and human kind. We mean that all that Man can find good in his experience is somehow or other related to God. How much more of a Father could God be than that? It is Fatherhood raised to its highest level. But how ridiculous we are when we begin to take such terms literally!

● Now there are two ways of approaching all these troublesome intellectual problems. We may decide that we are going to have concepts and terms and ideas for God that will satisfy our trained emotions or the desire of our heart, or we may decide that we are going to use whatever idea of God we can find that will actually bring us closer to the reality of God. Now there is a huge difference in these two approaches. Are we pleased and satisfied and happy and contented? Does it warm and comfort us? We may still be far from the Goodness of God. The important question is this: Does it bring us into actual contact with the Reality? For remember that God is not always a nice God. I said that God was always good and I may appear to be contradicting it now. God is not always a nice God. If He were,

we wouldn't have wars in the world today. I mean that if God were something that appealed to us as being nice and pleasant and conformed with all our ideas and desires and attitudes and habits, then we wouldn't be fighting. But you see we are a mass of evil impulses, most of us, and God stands over against them and says, "No". God isn't always pleasant, but our greatest good will be derived only as we find Him; not as we are merely led to feel good and comfortable and emotionally warm.

● Last week in our discussion group a problem of this sort came up, and one man said; "We have come here to study. We have come here to find more of the Nature and the meaning of God. Now, let's not be afraid of what we find." He was right. Most of us are afraid, afraid to question, afraid to pursue, afraid to even put up alongside the thing we believe another idea which may be better, though it disagrees. And so when you find something that begins to undermine what you like, you go to another church where you won't be disturbed, where you will be comfortable and happy. It's happening in this church, and it will go on happening. People who are afraid to question their religion! How do they expect to be able to meet the problems in this world today? People that don't have enough faith in themselves and in their God to pursue relentlessly the Nature of God, how are they going to meet the problems in the world today? We ought to have so much faith in God that no matter what happens to our ideas, we still know that the Reality of God is there working in our life. God is not dependent on our idea of Him, and the Reality of God in our life is not altogether dependent on our notion of it. You can't lose God, but if you stop investigating and pursuing your ideas you will cover up your mind so thickly that He can't ever break through to you. God is the Father of Men because Men are dependent upon Him, and He is the source of all the good we know.

And God has a will. Finally, God has a will and Man's salvation is dependent upon finding that will and serving it. That will is the growth of goodness, and you can never be sure what it is until you meet the situation. Wherever you are; whatever you are doing, there is a condition there that is new and there is the possibility of the emergence of great, new and entirely unexpected goods. There are conflicting elements and demands to be synthesized into creative new wholes. This is the growth of God. This is the "will" of God. When Men say they will serve God, they mean that they will give themselves to this growth of Good, to this growth of Love, to this creative

growth of goodness. Come what may, cost what it will, disagreeable, disastrous, painful and difficult as it may be, they will serve this growth that is the will of God. And only as we, in this modern world, come to grasp the Nature of God, and then decide that we will serve that end in spite of everything, will we find God growing in our lives and in our world; and only as that grows will we be able to carry forward the culture of the kingdom that we have glimpsed.